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THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE ON SIGNIFICANT MOVEMENTS IN RECENT THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT. II

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What Is Christianity?

REQUIRED BOOKS

Adolf Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*
Reinhold Seeberg, *The Fundamental Truths of the Christian Religion.*
Shailer Mathews, *The Gospel and the Modern Man.*

In our previous study we called attention to the fact that theology is today in the process of changing from the method of reproducing authorized doctrines to the method of asking inductively what we have a right to believe. It is, of course, quite possible that such an inductive study would yield results identical with the results of the method of appeal to authority. For example, the words of Mic. 6:8, "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God?" arouse the unqualified approval of every Christian, whether he does or does not regard the mere statement of the Bible as finally decisive. Moreover, in any study of the changes which are taking place in our thinking, we should remember the large territory of fundamental religious beliefs which command the confidence of generation after generation of men. Changes in our religious thinking are to be thought of as read-

justments of Christianity to new situations rather than as attempts to replace Christianity by something else.

Nevertheless, after this fact of historical continuity has received full credit, we must still recognize that not all of the Christian beliefs of one generation necessarily command the assent of later generations. One who lives under the pressure of the method of authority is more or less keenly conscious of a certain amount of theological coercion. A person is often expected to give hearty assent to doctrinal propositions which may have no real vitality for him. "Christianity" is declared by its authorized exponents to contain a certain sum of doctrines. The loyal Christian is expected to affirm all of these. So long as one remains content with the method of appeal to authority, one will usually accept the demands of the authoritative system, and will seek to justify the retention of the beliefs which cause difficulty. If, for example, one is in duty bound to believe in the infallibility of the Bible, one will find ways of explaining away the "apparent" difficulties and contradictions, so as still to be able to affirm what is expected.

But even among the bodies of Christians who retain the method of authority, serious problems arise. For there is by no means agreement as to the exact content of "scriptural" doctrine. Does Scripture or does it not require a belief in the special apostolic authority of Peter and of his successors? Does the Bible teach infant baptism, or does it forbid it? Ought a Christian to keep the seventh day of the week holy, or is the first day the sacred day of Christianity? Is the ceremonial washing of one another's feet as obligatory as is the observance of the Lord's Supper? These and many other questions divide Christians today into mutually exclusive denominations. Thus, even if one retain the method of authority, one has still to face the question of exactly defining Christianity in the presence of so many variations.

When, however, one admits the legitimacy of the method of honest and free inquiry, the question becomes still more difficult. For one who assumes this attitude will be likely to discover that he has no vital interest in some of the doctrines which under the method of authority he tried to persuade himself to believe. How often has a conscientious Christian tried loyally to acquire a positive enthusiasm for some aspect of traditional Christianity which really made no inner appeal to him, only to discover when he dared to think freely that the item in question really never belonged to his Christianity at all! It was simply a useless bit of lumber which he carried around with much groaning of spirit, but which he was never able to fit into the actual structure of his living faith. To be

able to abandon the lumber under such circumstances brings a sense of relief, and a new freedom to devote one's energies undividedly to the *real* aspects of one's religious faith. But if men are thus free to restrict attention to their little circle of vital convictions, how are we to define "Christianity"? May such free spirits not be leaving out certain essentials of Christianity?

Harnack's book, *What Is Christianity?*, originated in a community where the questions which we have indicated above are especially acute. The student in a modern university is taught to use the method of free inquiry everywhere. He is likely to have come to the university with a conception of religion involving the method of appeal to authority. He has perhaps been told by well-meaning friends that to doubt any of the authorized doctrines means to deny Christianity. But his critical investigations compel him to doubt some things. Can he then remain a Christian? If so, just what is the nature of a Christianity which permits a man to believe what he really has to believe, no matter whether it does or does not coincide with the traditional content of doctrine? Such are the religious problems which thousands of university students as well as thousands of thoughtful persons outside the universities are facing today. Harnack addressed himself precisely to this large group. The lectures were given informally to an audience of about six hundred students, with no thought of publication. A student present, however, took stenographic reports, and later submitted these to Harnack with the suggestion that they be published. Harnack agreed and found his larger

public. His book has been read by thousands of inquiring minds during the past few years.

Harnack proposes to answer the question "What is Christianity?" by asking what historical investigation tells us about it. He notes that there are many varying systems of belief and practice, all claiming to be the truthful expressions of Christianity. But underneath all these varying forms he believes that there must be a permanent "essence," which allows variation, indeed, but which itself may be always identified as the authentic gospel. Harnack thus undertakes to set the entire history of Christianity before us with the double purpose of showing, first, what the facts actually are; and second, how the essential gospel of Jesus persisted in the various forms of faith which meet us in Christian history. The conception of Christianity which he holds might be stated somewhat as follows: Real Christianity is to be recognized in all of the various historical forms of that faith. But when we take all the facts into account, we find that every form of faith has added to the simplicity of the gospel certain elements drawn from the contemporary life of men. These added elements may obscure the real gospel; they may even almost displace it. But at times the original gospel is reinterpreted by Christian reformers who reinstate the gospel message in its central place and subordinate or eliminate the non-Christian elements which have crept into the creeds and the practice of the church. Except for these periods of reformation, the history of the church seems to be largely a history of the progressive obscuration of the gospel.

How, now, shall we ascertain just what is the content of this original and eternal gospel? Harnack turns to the teaching of Jesus for his answer. But the historical facts concerning the rise of the books of the New Testament compel us to recognize that even here we have the interests of the contemporaneous world pressing in and finding a place in the interpretation which the evangelists gave to Jesus. Current Jewish beliefs, such as the expectation of a catastrophic end of the existing era and the sudden miraculous appearance of the messianic kingdom, appear in the reports of Jesus' discourses. Demons are apparently regarded as real entities working actual disasters. Harnack believes, however, that when we get beneath this superficial garb of inherited ideas we may discern the pure gospel as Jesus proclaimed it. This gospel is purely spiritual, is easily understood by every man, and is of universal validity. It is the real "essence" of Christianity. Harnack sums it up in the following three ideas: "The Kingdom of God and Its Coming"; "God, the Father, and the Infinite Value of the Human Soul"; and "The Higher Righteousness and the Precept of Love." Wherever the spiritual power of these ideals controls men, there we have essential Christianity. Whatever is not vitally related to these ideals is extraneous to Christianity.

The book expounds in a most interesting and suggestive fashion the great historic types of Christianity, showing how each of them added to the pure gospel certain philosophical or ritualistic or political elements in order to make the church dominant. The presence of the

gospel is recognized in all these historic forms. But Harnack judges the Christianity of any church or of any period by asking whether it has put in the forefront the simple spiritual gospel. It is, of course, to be expected that a Protestant like Harnack will judge adversely the Christianity of the Greek Catholic or the Roman Catholic church. But when the principle of criticism is applied so as to exclude from essential Christianity certain elements of New Testament doctrines, and certain tenets which orthodox Protestantism holds dear, Harnack must expect to meet with objection.

The utterances which called forth most general protest were those concerned with Christology. Does the "essence" of Christianity include the doctrine of the deity of Christ? Harnack's statement, "The Gospel as Jesus proclaimed it, has to do with the Father only and not with the Son," aroused widespread protest. Harnack's position here was often misunderstood. He was declaring that Jesus demanded no particular christological creed as an essential of discipleship. But he also explicitly stated that an acquaintance with Jesus inevitably involves such an adoration of him that some sort of "belief" concerning him must find creedal expression. Harnack, however, believes that it is the living attitude of trust and reverence which constitutes essential Christianity rather than any particular form of Christology. His position on this point was made clear in an address delivered before the Congress of Liberal Religion at Berlin in 1910, where he spoke of the "double gospel"—the gospel of Jesus and the gospel *about* Jesus. He contended that

the latter should always be subordinate to the former.

A similar protest was raised against Harnack's position concerning the resurrection of Jesus. Here also he attempted to distinguish between the attitude of faith and a specific doctrine of bodily resurrection. The latter is not an essential of Christianity; the former is.

Harnack thus holds that in every form of Christianity, except that expressed in the spiritual message of Jesus, there is a considerable amount which is not essentially Christian. The practical outcome of his position would be the elimination of many items on which traditional Christianity has been insisting. To those whose religious experience craves a larger content than the simple gospel expounded by Harnack, he seems to have ruled out large portions of primitive Christianity from any normative place. He is charged with having selected only such elements of the teaching of Jesus as are agreeable to his modern, critically intellectual, faith. Is such a minimum really Christianity? Or does it represent a rationalistic ethics of modern times masquerading in the garb of Christianity? This question has found frequent expression among Harnack's critics.

Seeberg's book, *The Fundamental Truths of the Christian Religion*, like Harnack's, consisted originally of a series of lectures delivered before the students of the University of Berlin. These lectures were given just two years after Harnack's, and were intended to set forth a more conservative judgment as to the essentials of Christianity. Seeberg is today the most prominent figure in the so-called "modern-positive"

school of theologians. The group to which he belongs recognizes that the modern spirit demands complete freedom of investigation. The method of appeal to authority is therefore abandoned; and critical investigation is heartily welcomed. But in the use of critical inquiry, the attempt is made to retain a more positive attitude toward inherited doctrines than was shown by Harnack.

Important as it is to insist, as Harnack does, that the essence of Christianity is to be found in that which is inwardly experienced, Seeberg feels that we should be careful not to lay the chief stress on the experience as such. That which makes a man a Christian is the divine cause and source of his experience. We should define essential Christianity in terms of the divine provision for man's experience of redemption, rather than in terms of the pure spirituality of the Christian experience.

Accordingly, Seeberg throws the emphasis constantly on the objective side of Christianity. He stresses such conceptions as revelation, grace, divine sovereignty, and the like. He would have us realize that our Christian experience is possible only as we look constantly to the objective source of such experience. It is this objective source which furnishes the "essence" of Christianity. Indeed, he conceives all religion as due to a direct donation from a divine source. Man would never have worked out the idea of God by himself. It must be "given to man from the outside" (p. 10). Christianity thus is essentially something given to man. And what it furnishes is so unique

that it can never be reduced to any mere combination of spiritual ideals. Man is to be saved by accepting the special revelation which Christianity provides, or he cannot be saved at all. Christianity is *the* religion, not, as Harnack said, because the experience which it emphasizes is the most spiritually simple and complete, but because Christianity alone provides an absolute and final revelation. "What other religions promise to mankind becomes fact in Christianity alone."

Seeberg insists, indeed, that the real nature of Christianity is best understood when it appears in Christian experience; but such experience should lead us back to a recognition of its divine causes. To be a Christian means that God is actually known to be active in one's life and in the world, and that this activity is revealed to us and made effective through Jesus Christ. The contrast between Seeberg and Harnack is especially interesting in their respective treatments of the doctrine of Christ. Harnack is concerned to represent Jesus as one whose discernment of spiritual ideals was epoch-making. Seeberg is concerned to affirm concerning Christ those traits which constitute him the active revelation of the sovereign power of God. For Harnack, Christology does not belong to the "essence" of Christianity. For Seeberg, it is the very kernel of Christianity. Harnack is interested in the teaching of Jesus as an expression of the religious insight of Jesus. Seeberg is interested in seeing in the activities of Jesus the expression of the "absolute love-energy" of God.

So long as primary emphasis is laid on the specific divine source of our

Christian experience, Seeberg is willing to allow considerable liberty of interpretation. It is not so much the precise content of the doctrine of the divinity of Christ which matters. It is the thought of Christ as essentially the revelation of God's loving will. The doctrine of Christ's work may take many forms. The important thing is the recognition that Christ's activities constitute the only means by which we may be redeemed from sin and be made sure of God's presence. Seeberg thus preserves the religious attitude of orthodoxy, while at the same time making place for free critical scholarship.

Certain difficulties, however, arise in the carrying-out of this method. If the essence of Christianity is to be found fundamentally in the divine provision for our salvation rather than in the human experience of salvation, can we trust wholly to human experience to define the divine source? Must there not be some sort of a divine guaranty to identify the revelation? For there are varieties of Christian experience; and some of these varieties must be less accurate than others in their interpretation of the nature of revelation. The reader whose experience is similar to that of Seeberg will probably feel that his book successfully combines the recognition of a supernatural essence of Christianity with the use of the critical method of investigation. But Seeberg has had to meet criticism from those who do not share his particular kind of experience. To the orthodox man, he seems to have conceded altogether too much and to have failed to uphold the entire supernatural structure of Christianity. To the more liberal Christian,

some of his assertions seem to be unduly dogmatic and sweeping, in view of the fact that he appeals to a critical examination of experience in justification of them.

Mathews' book, *The Gospel and the Modern Man*, seeks to avoid the subjective elements which give to both Harnack's book and that of Seeberg an unwelcome vagueness. Neither of these men gives full and positive recognition to all the elements of New Testament Christianity. Both of them attempt to present the content of the gospel in such a way as to make it appear that the religious beliefs of modern men were really the fundamentals of the New Testament, and hence may be regarded as essential Christianity. For example, since the modern man does not express his religious hopes in terms of apocalyptic catastrophe, the eschatology of the New Testament is treated as an unimportant matter. But such an interpretation fails to do justice to the Christianity of the primitive disciples. And if we do not interpret accurately the Christianity of this primitive period, how can we be sure that we are in a position to give an accurate definition of Christianity for our own age or for any age?

Mathews, therefore, attempts to set forth the Christianity of the New Testament just as it actually was held by the men of that age. This is demanded by historical honesty. Of course, in such a presentation, we find spiritual ideals interrelated with cosmic and philosophic views which the modern man does not employ. But to strip off these views, just because they do not appeal to us, and then to try to account for the spiritual power of early Christianity purely

in terms of the remainder, is futile. The early Christians achieved what they did because of the entirety of their beliefs, not because of a portion of these. In particular Mathews calls attention to the important place occupied by the advent hope of the early church. Harnack and Seeberg both depreciate this. Mathews allows it to have the importance which the New Testament actually gives to it.

Thus recognizing all the facts, Mathews holds that we may analyze the New Testament faith roughly into two elements: (1) actual experiences on the part of Jesus or of the disciples due to their contact with definite facts and (2) inherited ideas or concepts which they used in the exposition of those experiences. The latter were just as essential as the former to the practical expression of the Christianity of the New Testament, and should not be depreciated just because we no longer employ them. But they do not represent so primary and fundamental an aspect of Christianity as do the facts of experience.

After having made this analysis, it is possible to ask whether we may not similarly analyze our modern life. Can we not retain the facts of New Testament experience and combine these with certain current concepts which for the practical purpose of expressing Christian beliefs may be regarded as equivalents of the New Testament interpretative concepts? If such equivalents can be found, we can carry over into modern life the inspiration of the entire New Testament instead of using only a fraction of it.

The outcome of this interesting analysis is the presentation of the gospel in terms of modern thought, so that one may retain complete freedom of thinking, and may yet find strength and inspiration in believing in the reality of the God of love, who is revealed through Jesus, and who lifts us above sin through the experience of vital faith in the saving power of Jesus. Granting to every age the right to employ such interpretative concepts as are effective, this method of exposition will put the emphasis on the objective facts lying back of the New Testament experience. These facts alone make possible a *Christian* experience in any age. They must of course be interpreted in terms of some sort of religious philosophy; but no religious philosophy can call itself "Christian" if it does not regard itself as interpreting these ultimate facts.

This book marks a distinct advance upon the other two in that it recognizes the positive value of the entire field of Christian thinking, either in the New Testament or in modern times. To give positive value to interpretative concepts which admittedly come out of the historical development of humanity means a more generous and more truthful treatment of Christianity. We need not strip off anything from ancient Christian thought. Neither need we be afraid of allowing modern ideas to play a positive part in the expression of Christianity. There is in Christianity a vitality, a creative power of using environment, which forbids us to define it in such a way as to ignore that creative aspect of faith. Christianity is always based on the objective facts involved in the life and work of Christ. It always

expresses itself in interpretations which vary.

One or two questions will doubtless arise during the reading of this book. The first question is whether the "facts" of the gospel can be so clearly differentiated from the "interpretations" as to enable us in this way to determine the abiding essence of Christianity. In particular, when we come to the person of Christ we find all our information given in terms of the interpretations of the evangelists and apostles. Just what are the "facts" concerning Jesus lying back of these records? One who does not share Mathews' particular christological faith would doubtless contend that he had drawn wrong inferences in certain instances. Those who are aware of the intricacies of the historical interpretation of the Gospels will perhaps feel that we are not yet quite ready to establish our definitive list of "facts." Meanwhile, as Mathews in more than one place recognizes, some of the admitted "interpretations" are capable of stimulating in us genuine Christian faith. Why, then, should these not be admitted as correlative with the "facts"?

A second question is as to whether Mathews' doctrine of "equivalents" is as valid as he assumes. Is it true that we may find equivalents for all New Testament religious ideas in modern thought? Or are some inevitably left behind because they are entirely outgrown? If some are omitted, we do not fill out the entire outline of New Testament Christianity. On the other hand, do we find the real religious significance of a modern religious idea by interpreting it as an "equivalent" of an idea which arose centuries ago in connection with conditions of life very different from

our own? Is not the real religious significance of a modern idea to be sought in its modern origin, rather than in its likeness or unlikeness to an ancient idea? An interesting supplement to the book under discussion will be furnished by Mathews in a forthcoming volume entitled, *The Evolution of Christianity*. Here he attempts to trace the workings of generic Christianity in the history of Christian thinking.

All three of the books here reviewed assume that essential Christianity is to be found typically and factually in its original form, as that form has been preserved to us in the writings of the New Testament. All three assume that the modern Christian derives his religious life directly from this New Testament form of Christianity. The intervening history is interesting; it may even be edifying in certain respects. But in attempting to define the real nature of Christianity it may be practically ignored. Christianity is found typically and normatively in its original form. To be a Christian means to come into vital relation with the historical Jesus, and to let one's beliefs and practice be guided by this norm objectively to be found only in the first century.

In the next study we shall consider certain books which challenge this point of view, and which contend that the entire course of Christian history must be taken into account if we are to understand what Christianity really is.

ADDITIONAL LITERATURE BEARING ON THE QUESTION OF THE NATURE OF CHRISTIANITY

Harnack's book brought out a flood of criticisms in Germany. Only a few of the publications of his critics have been trans-

lated into English.—H. Cremer's *What Is Christianity? A Reply to Harnack* attempts to show that frank historical investigation would lead one to discover the Pauline doctrine of redemption as the central idea of Christianity.—An English scholar, T. B. Strong, in a book entitled *Historical Christianity*, insists that Harnack has unduly reduced the content of real Christianity.—An excellent survey of the controversy, so far as English thought is concerned, is found in T. Bailey Saunders' *Professor Harnack and His Oxford Critics*. Saunders is an ardent supporter of Harnack.—The brilliant criticism of Loisy, in his *The Gospel and the Church*, will be considered in detail in the next study.—A. E. Garvie's article "Christianity," in the Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, supplies much interesting information concerning the problem of defining Christianity.—William Adams Brown, in *The Essence of Christianity*, has furnished a valuable and suggestive history of the attempts to define Christianity from the earliest days down to the present.—The speculative attempts to identify Christianity with a modern monistic religious philosophy are well illustrated in John Caird's *The Fundamental Ideas of Christianity* and Josiah Royce's *The Problem of Christianity*.—The difficulties which a modern philosopher meets in traditional Christianity are strikingly set forth in Eucken's *Can We Still Be Christians?*—W. N. Clarke faced the problem before us in a series of lectures delivered before a university audience, entitled, *What Shall We Think of Christianity?*—The recent volume by several Oxford scholars, entitled *Foundations*, deals with critical thoroughness with several of the questions involved

in determining the exact nature of Christianity.—D. S. Cairns, in *Christianity in the Modern World*, has attempted a synthesis between primitive Christianity and our present religious aspirations.—B. W. Bacon's *Christianity, New and Old* is a comparative study of ancient and modern Christian beliefs, with a full recognition of the latest scholarship on all phases of the situation, and a suggested definition of Christianity in the light of such scholarship. In connection with Mathews' book one might well read an article of his in the *American Journal of Theology*, January, 1909, entitled "A Positive Method for an Evangelical Theology."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Can Christianity be adequately defined in terms of the teachings of Jesus?
2. How definitely can we ascertain the "facts" lying back of the New Testament testimony concerning Jesus?
3. In what respects is the Christianity of today identical with the Christianity of the first century?
4. If certain conceptions of the New Testament (e.g., the belief in the activity of demons) do not seem to us today to be true, have we a right to declare that such conceptions are not "essential" to Christianity?
5. Can we make a definite objective distinction between the "permanent" and the "transient" in Christianity?
6. Was the advent hope of the early Christians any less "essential" to their Christianity than was the belief in the divine character of Christ?
7. Are there equivalents in modern religious thinking for all aspects of New Testament Christianity?